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Can Whaling in Japan be Justified by Culture?

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FYS 100: Sushi is Not Raw Fish

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In an analysis on the debate of whale meat and its consumption, Holtzman (2017) quotes a conversation between a mother and daughter in a Japanese documentary on the issue:

> 'What did you tell them?' asks the wife of a dolphin fisherman in Taiji, Japan, in a scene from the Japanese documentary *Whales, Blessing from the Sea* (Asahi Television 2010), inquiring from their daughter how she made her case in a school debate about the future of the local dolphin hunt and Japanese dolphin consumption. 'I hope you didn't just use the 'culture argument'?' the mother implored. 'That won't do,' agreed the daughter. 'It must go deeper than that.'

In societies today, food is just one of the many things utilized for promoting and accepting cultural differences. Ethnic restaurants, for instance, are a common means for people to encounter other cultures through its consumption. While many forms of cultural diversity can be viewed as problematic, food is typically validated and protected. However, whales—along with other cetaceans such as dolphins—are at the forefront of the tension in regards to endangered foods, including the denunciation of cultural differences due to conservation. This issue can be seen with the ongoing debate in regard to Japan's whaling. Many see it as an unnecessary cruelty towards these species, arguing that their whaling culture is not similar to their aboriginal counter-parts (whom are still allowed to whale to maintain their culture) as the basis of most of their anti-whaling arguments—including the fact that most Japanese today do not eat or enjoy whale at all.

If this is the case, why is there still a strong pro-whaling movement within Japan, despite the international pressure brought upon them and the country's image? Opposers of the practice should instead look at the factors that led to such an outcome. In order to understand the best solution for both sides, it may be to allow the country to resume commercial whaling.

Literature Review

A History of IWC and Japanese Whaling

Despite whalers' 19th century technology based upon manpower (Clapham, 2016, p. 216), some slower whale populations—such as sperm whales, humpbacks, and bowheads—had already been sufficiently depleted towards the end of the century. Whalers, however, had far less success with faster species such as fast blue and fin (p. 217). The invention of the steam engine and explosive harpoon provided a means to chase and hunt these previously invulnerable whales. With these innovations, the stage was set for modern whaling. Shore-based operations moved to deep sea, to which Clapham notes that "…huge factory ships could process more whales in a single day than would be captured by a typical nineteenth century New England whaler during the course of a five-year voyage" (p. 218).

Global catches rose to staggering heights. Clapham (qtd. in Rocha) states that "The combined catch of blue and fin whales exceeded 300,000 animals during the single decade of the 1930s. Overall, between 1904 and the end of World War II, more than 1,100,000 whales were killed worldwide" (p. 217). Evidence of a decline in whale populations became apparent. Overall, regulation was required if the whaling industry were still to remain a profitable business.

Consequently, this incited 15 whaling nations to form the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1946 to "oversee management of the industry, conduct research, set catch quotas, and establish various rules and safeguards. The Convention was, in theory, designed to 'provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry'—in other words, it aimed to promote sustainable whaling" (p. 2). Japan did not immediately join IWC at conception. This is in part due to post-war recovery from World War II, with whale meat considered a vital food source at the time. Japan

later joined the IWC in 1951, aiming to properly conserve whale stocks to make the continued development of its whaling industry possible.

Recent Developments

On December 26, 2018, Japan's government announced it would withdraw from the IWC to resume commercial whaling in July of 2019. A statement made by the Chief Secretary of Prime Minister Abe's cabinet justified the decision by arguing the IWC "refused to agree to take any tangible steps towards reaching a common position that would ensure the sustainable management of whale resources." Even so, the government "remains committed to international cooperation for the proper management of marine living resources. […] Japan will continue to contribute to the science-based sustainable management of whale resources" (2018, sec. 3-5). The Japanese government also clarified its suspension of annual hunts in the Southern Ocean, Antarctica, which were previously done under the notion of scientific research. Reception from member nations and international media was widely critical. The nation's attempts over the years to overturn IWC's ban on commercial whaling—then, to withdraw—led most to believe Japan disregarded conservation and issued itself a unilateral license to "kill."

However, this decision was likely inevitable. Holm (2019), for instance, revisited four coastal communities in Japan to interview locals on the reasoning behind the announcement:

> I asked a whaler, why it took the Japanese government 30 years to withdraw from the IWC and restart commercial whaling. He remarked that this option has always been on the table, but Japan has been historically very conscious of its public image and strongly committed to international rules. In the past two years, however, the US and some European countries have shown an increased willingness to leave international

> organizations when they did not operate in their countries' interests. In this respect, Japan was just following the global trend (p. 9).

Japan's longstanding demands for whaling quota is not news. Historically, the government has repeatedly objected to most IWC decisions, (to note, IWC has no power to enforce its decisions on its members, as nations can submit a formal objection to any regulation) yet has evidently succumbed to international pressure from other member nations. Ultimately, the failure to reach an agreement to resume commercial whaling at the IWC meeting in Brazil of 2018 incited the announcement: "…orderly development of the whaling industry which is clearly mentioned in the Convention was not taken into account at all during the deliberations, and quite regrettably, it unveiled the fact that it is not possible in the IWC even to seek the coexistence of States with different views" (2018, sec. 4). However, one core accusation that underlies much of the criticism Japan receives, and is conscious of, is the notion that its "scientific research" is de facto commercial whaling. Accordingly, an interview with a scientist working for the Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR) addressed this as a factor that led to Japan's announcement to suspend scientific whaling: "the end of the controversial whaling program was a way to minimize Japan's reputation when withdrawing from the IWC by giving the anti-whaling nations what they wanted most without giving up whaling completely. […] many Western observers will now look very closely at the new coastal commercial whaling operations; therefore, it is extremely important that the scientific research continues to guarantee a sustainable use of whale stocks: 'The whole world is looking at us. We cannot screw this up'" (Holm, 2019, p. 9). The scientist further explained that minke whale stocks in the Antarctic Ocean are likely more stable than in the Pacific—therefore, this decision may bring upon more difficulties in the consequence of Japan's attempt to reduce criticism.

The overview described above briefly defines the current perspective on whaling in terms of Japan. It should certainly be noted that this decision is generally regarded as self-willed. Such an outcome raises the question: if it is evident that Japan is conscious of its international image, why still leave the IWC? The government likely saw the opportunity to uphold its claim that sustainable whaling is possible. Here, also, historical context plays a large role.

Historical Background

An anthology of poems called the *Man'yō-shū* compiled from the late 7th century to the 8th century uses the word *"Isana-tori"* (勇魚取り, いさなとり) to describe the ocean. "*Isana"* translates to "brave fish," (referring to whale) while *"tori"* means to catch (Itoh, 2017). These poems suggest that the Japanese had already been engaged in whaling by the Nara Period (710-794); with evidence of the practice also even occurring earlier in the Jōmon Period (14,000-300 BCE). However, Sutter (2018) notes this contributes to many pro-whaling arguments creating "an exaggerated sense of cultural continuity by focusing on broad trends and generalizations rather than specific historical details," when responding to claims at an ICR summit in 2002 that Japan has a "proud tradition of whaling which she has built up over nine thousand years. […] the practice of eating whale meat and its associated rituals and performing arts that has [sic] been developed over the years were in danger of vanishing if commercial whaling could not continue in the twenty-first century'" (paras. 5-6). Attempts to validate Japan's whaling history by its prehistoric origins —despite its existence—can present problems. The practice was largely sporadic. As such, this overview begins when evidence indicated a rise of "organized whaling."

Traditional Whaling

The Japanese engaged in classical whaling (古式捕鯨) from the late 1500s to the early 1900s, with the practice gaining traction after 1600. The use of rudimentary row boats, manual

harpoons, and fishing nets limited operations to coastal areas—which contrasted greatly to the pelagic whaling that developed in accordance to Japan's industrialization and modernization (Itoh, 2017). Accordingly, these whalers were seasonal rather than full-time, working as fishermen for the majority of the year—only to engage in coastal whaling during whales' migration season. This was also the case for most professional members of whaling guilds. Itoh (qtd. in Tomokichi) notes of the saying: "The catch of the whale made seven bays prosper" (p. 28). While true, the prosperity was only temporary. Whaling was likely not considered a full-time occupation.

Regardless, each of the hundreds of these whaling groups active during the 1600s to the end of the 1900s required up to forty boat crews working in coordination on the water, and hundreds more to process the whales on shore before they spoil (Arch, 2018, p. 49-50). Organized whaling became a big business, employing workers in the tens of thousands. The two inventions of the manual harpoon method (突き取り猟)and the net method (網捕り猟) in the late 1600s revolutionized classical whaling. These enabled the Japanese to catch faster whales, such as the humpback and sei (Itoh, p. 30). However, whale species such as the blue and fin were too large to take on. They could only harvest the ones that stranded ashore.

Modern Whaling

Due to the configuration of Japan's land being near the continental shelf and coastal migration routes, this allowed Japanese whalers to continue shore-based whaling far longer than other commercial whalers, such as those in the West (Arch, 2018, p. 6). As Pacific whale populations collapsed under American whalers' hunting practices in the 1840s, Japanese whalers needed to quickly adopt to the technologies of the global whaling industry to hunt the faster, open-ocean whales, instead of being limited to the coastline (p. 7). They also needed to adapt to

the changing populations of different species—while subtle, the impact of Japanese whaling over the century did diminish coastal numbers. As Japan looked toward foreign whalers for new techniques and ideas, as to "the development of a strong, internationally competitive Japan in the new Meiji era (1868-1912). […] but also showed a new perspective entirely on the role of whales and whaling in Japan" (p. 73). This led to a dramatic adjustment for whalers who now had to operate in an environment further offshore, with unfamiliar species to hunt and unfamiliar technology to utilize.

Even so, the most successful whalers gradually became the ones who were less attached to the coast and utilized new technologies to chase new species of whales—as such, "with the dramatic shift between the culture of Tokugawa Japan and a rapidly modernizing Meiji Japan, the place of whales perforce shifted as well, so continuity is very thin between the organized costal whaling groups and their modern counterparts operating in Antarctica and the far northern Pacific, despite pro-whaling arguments emphasizing the cultural importance of "traditional" whaling in Japan today" (p. 75). Thus, the Meiji industrialization and modernization push that occurred in Japan resulted in such a dramatic shift to modern industrial whaling that the argument of whaling traditions being continuous and ongoing is simply not true. This also coincides with prehistoric whaling. But the goal of presenting these criticisms is not to diminish the importance of Japan's whaling history. Rather, the goal here is to simply demonstrate how these arguments fail to realize how the connection between whales and people influenced the practice. It is also to make the case that defining Japan's history with whales—much less whaling—cannot be defined solely as a niche "tradition" or "culture," lasting only a couple hundred years; as it is evidently more complex. Far from being just a coastal business relevant to

people outside conventional society, whaling influenced basic aspects of early modern Japanese life through its understanding of the natural world and their relationship within it.

The disconnect between traditional and modern should also not be acknowledged as a sign of the culture's fragility. Instead, it should be noted that the interdependence of the shore and the marine changed—and continues to do so—as a result of modern innovations and technologies. As Arch (2018) explains:

> In a modern Japanese culture that seems to have forgotten most of their personal ties to the ocean environment, an argument for an unbroken cultural heritage of whaling operates on superficial assumptions of continuity, assumptions that regular school histories barely mentioning the ocean can do little to counteract. The lack of direct contact with coastal waters in favor of consumption of products of globally distant, industrial fisheries is another part of this changing relationship that removes the personal experiences of the early modern period into a modern urban forgetfulness about the physical realities and importance of the ocean. For example, the Japanese people currently consume the majority of the world's tuna harvest, but because that harvest happens so far from their everyday lives, it is too easy for people eating prime cuts of sushi to think about the ocean as a machine for producing fish rather than an ecosystem into which the Japanese archipelago is integrated (p. 188).

By downplaying the changes brought by modernization, these arguments "have the additional effect of diminishing the past role of the ocean in Japanese society to the same relatively low level that it has today" (p. 188). In the face of urbanization and industrialization, it was a culture forced to adapt itself figuratively and literally by distancing people away from working on and with the ocean and coastal spaces within Japan. Tradition and culture are evidently bound to

drastically change—entirely, in most cases—due to the shift in the relationship between people and whales. Of course, this apparent issue of continuity should be acknowledged. But regardless of historical inconsistencies, the unique, unlikely nature of Japan's relationship with whales makes it clear: whaling in the Japanese archipelago was critical to the development of its society and should be considered as such.

The Cultural and Practical Role of Whale

Practical Uses

The final statement by the Chief Secretary asserts that "In its long history, Japan has used whales not only as a source of protein but also for a variety of other purposes. Engagement in whaling has been supporting local communities, and thereby developed the life and culture of using whales" (sec. 8). Early modern Japanese whaling was an industry that utilized many different parts of the whales, including whale products that were far more influential than lamp oil—a stark contrast to Western whaling. It was not a small-scale practice that only satisfied local needs, but rather a business centered on maximizing profit from utilizing all the natural resources whales provided. As Itoh explains:

> They ate whale meat and used baleen to make a variety of items, ranging from combs, Japanese chess (shōgi) pieces, parts of string musical instruments, to signature seals. They extracted whale oil not only from blubber (fatty parts under the skin), but also from the bones by grinding and boiling them. They then used whale oil as fuel for lanterns and as lubricant for tools, as well as insect repellant in rice fields and houses (they coated walls of rooms with whale oil). They even ground the bones further, after extracting whale oil from them, and used them as fertilizer (p. 31, Itoh).

Whales were a resource capable of not only supplying meat, but also indirectly supported successful crop production. Japan was thoroughly more urban than most other early modern states during the 17th century. Therefore, the economy was supported by an equally intense urban development and production of staple and cash crops. Rice, the country's staple food, was the basis of financial systems within society—with land taxes and samurai stipends being paid in rice. As such, the importance of fertilizers and pest control was immense. Arch summarizes an agricultural treatise by Satō Nobuhiro, who "demonstrates the wide variety and importance of fertilizers, not just to prevent crop failure and famine in marginal areas, but also for the economy. […] He recommended dried sardines and sardine oil as the best marine fertilizer for rice, followed by whale oil…Whale bones, because of their oiliness, were also a necessary additive to promote bountiful cash crops such as sugarcane, indigo, tobacco, hemp, and ramie" (Arch, p. 101). Whale oil was also instrumental in the production of rice, as it was the first recorded insecticide developed in Japan for agriculture. Originally speculated to have appeared in Kyushu, the oil was used in the late 17th to early 19th century, creating an extensive market for oil throughout agricultural areas (p. 102-104). As whale oil became more expensive due to the decline in catches, farmers used cheaper plant-based oils to ward off insects—but used double the amount to effectively do so. Regardless, fertilizer was only one aspect of these whale-based products. Whale tendons could also be used to create the cotton-beating bow, an essential instrument for processing cotton. Their "skin became leather, tendons and intestines became gut strings, bones became fertilizer and sometimes construction materials, and baleen was shaped into a wide variety of products such as sword hilt wraps, folding headrests, clothing stiffeners, and springs" (Arch, p. 84). Here, whales served as a natural resource capable of providing a

multitude of products—and, in turn, developed complex markets and the beginnings of a proto-industrialized economy in Japan.

Whale-Eating Culture

Whale meat was a rare quality food item before the rise of whaling groups. As such, it coincides with the fact that "some scattered references of whale as a delicacy eaten by members of the Kyoto court or high-ranking samurai before the Tokugawa period, generally in soup, which might have contained meat or some other part of the whale" (Arch, p. 92). As indicated above, the pre-modern whaling industry was framed as a business focused on maximizing profits—but this fact should not diminish the relevance of local whale meat trade. Arch (qtd. in Yasushi) states "The local market for whale meat was somewhat distinct from whaling group's long-distance market for oil and other parts. The *ōnaya* whaling group management took approximately 60% of the whale and gave the remaining portion to the *konaya* merchant investors" (p. 97). The amount of meat sold also varied by season, the amount of oil extracted, and calculations based on the local market value or if they were to sell it elsewhere. Arch explains that "the decision of where and how to sell the whale meat also seems to have been influenced by the species and numbers of whales caught in a season, and from which whaling grounds they were taken" (p. 99). In sum, the complexity surrounding the whale meat market was largely derived from the profits that could be gained. Regardless, the level of complexity in this business of whale meat should be an indicator of its importance.

Despite this, the rapid industrialization drastically changed all of these factors. Regardless of the argument that whale meat was an essential food item post WWII, Burgess (qtd. in Watanabe) states "He () notes that the stimulus for the spread of whale meat consumption from the end of the nineteenth century was a "vigorous promotion by the whaling industry" and

even then he notes that whale meat only came to be widely eaten as part of the daily diet after 1946 as a result of food shortages" (p. 7). As such, there is no indication that eating whale meat was a "traditional food culture" as argued by pro-whaling organizations—this much is evident in the market surrounding whale meat in pre-modern Japan, and the drastic modernization that changed whaling as a whole. Nevertheless, if the presence of whale meat in its food culture is any indicator of the its importance, acknowledging the practical uses of whale concludes that its role was rather distinct: food supply was only one facet of the larger picture.

The Future of Japanese Whaling

Commercial Whaling Resumption

After the IWC issued a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982, Japan has since lobbied to the IWC for its legal resumption. Their first attempt, at the 38th annual meeting in 1986, the Japanese delegation argued that its Small Type Coastal Whaling (STCW) resembled aboriginal whaling—of which was exempt from the moratorium if that community met the criteria (Holm, 2019, p. 4). Prior to the next meeting in 1988, a group of social scientists led by Milton Freeman conducted fieldwork in four communities: Taiji in Wakayama, Wadaura in Chiba, Ayukawa in Miyagi, and Abashiri in Hokkaido. In its report, referred to as the "Freeman report" these STWC communities were referred to as "whaling towns."

Based on Holm's interviews with the locale after the announcement of the government's withdrawal, it remains to be seen whether the industry will be able operate successfully in these new conditions: "A former employee of the Taiji Whale Museum remarked: 'I don't think commercial whaling will promote regional development. Can we really maintain this industry as long as there is no demand?'" (p. 6). Regardless of low demand, it is also important to note that these communities were able to whale under scientific whaling regulations—which were funded

by the government: “Scientific whaling has never been more than a temporary solution to keep the STWC companies alive. […] The CEO of Gaibō Hogei expects that the government will keep doing scientific research on coastal whaling to guarantee a sustainable use of the whale stocks, but now the scientists will be guests on his boats and working according to his schedule” (p. 8). While promising, the STCW is not expected to expand significantly. Providing the conditions necessary for a viable successful commercial whaling industry is difficult—with little capital, active whalers, and old equipment, it remains to be seen whether the industry will continue without support. Further, “‘shifting consumer tastes and a growing environmental awareness have already led to a steep decline in Japanese whale meat consumption, from 203,000 tons in 1965 to just 4000 tons in 2015. Three major fishing companies appear to have no interest in commercial whaling. Cooke suspects Japan will go the way of Norway, where ‘a niche operation is feeding a niche market but with decreasing interest in the market and decreasing interest in going whaling’” (Normile, para. 10).

Regardless, the whaling industry is still operating with these conditions. It is uncertain whether the resumption of commercial whaling will increase demand whatsoever, but “in the past 30 years, the pro-whaling associations have gone to great lengths to increase the availability of whale meat, pushing the concept of “whaling towns” even outside the original four communities” (Holm, p. 14). These actions contradict, as indicated, the viability of the industry’s continued survival. Then why support it? If not international image nor financial gain, then the issue may lie within contextual factors.

Identity, National Pride, and International Pressure

When analyzing why the anti-whaling “norm” resonates so poorly in the domestic sphere, Burgess “would suggest that whaling has become a symbol of national identity, an explanation

which might help to explain Japan's resistance to international pressure" (p. 7). As such, international pressure has become counter-productive as it only confirms that the anti-whaling movement is seen as "anti-Japanese." One factor is the lack of organized anti-whaling groups within the country, while the pro-whaling outnumbers them. Burgess notes that (qtd. in Danaher) "there is no substantial anti-whaling coverage in the media...the numbers of people willing to be outspoken against whaling are very limited. […] Foreign demands on Japan to stop whaling are not aligning with any powerful domestic constituencies, whereas domestic political pressure on Japan to continue whaling is great" (p. 9). Due to this, the whaling issue has become a "national symbol" which is inherently built to oppose foreign pressure—or, in a sense, any imperialism that may undermine or threaten its existence. As Burgess explains:

> In other words, as Watanabe suggested earlier, whaling has become a conservative ideological project of the state, closely tied with national identity. Kallad and Moeran () suggest that one of the reasons this re-definition has been so successful is that, in the post war period at least, there has been a lack of national symbols acceptable to all Japanese: "In this vacuum of national symbols, whale meat has provided a particularly powerful image," they write, "…and the whaling issue serves to strengthen much Japanese myths about their identity (日本人論), which itself helps fuel one form of Japanese nationalism" (p. 10-11).

As an example, after the release of the American documentary "The Cove" which featured a Taiji dolphin hunt in a critical way, it brought the "whaling towns" at the center of the media and IWC's attention. Western activists traveled each year to demand the dolphin hunts be stopped and also criticized Taiji's whaling culture. Holm notes that "Ishii Atsushi has argued in 2011 that many Japanese citizens were not "pro-whaling," but rather "anti-anti-whaling" because of the Western

criticism that was perceived by many Japanese as unfair" (Holm, p. 6). Protests in 2010 against the operation "Sea-Shepard" that obstructed Japanese whaling operations in the Antarctic Ocean were seen as malicious actions motivated by racial prejudice and discrimination. Consequently, the ideology of race became a central feature in the arguments between pro and anti-whaling groups.

Regardless, the issue has been framed as "Japan vs. the West, specifically the Japanese as victims of Western discrimination, imperialism, and 'Japan bashing'" (Burgess, p. 12). Therefore, such actions by the Sea-Shepard and the effects of "The Cove" movie have become a focal point for the pro-whaling voices within Japan—further solidifying the message that whaling is inherently tied with the Japanese race. This could also explain the government's viewpoint on whale meat: "the official position is that eating whale meat is an untouchable traditional culture rooted in history. […] Watanabe points out that the current focus on 'whales for meat' stems from the Japanese government's sponsorship of whaling as a kind of 'national industry,' closely bound to imperialism and empire" (p. 7). As such, continued militant actions and foreign media criticism will back-fire, rather than promote conservatist views—as it is a "counter-movement" in response to this criticism—with "western moral and green arguments being matched in emotional intensity by the Japanese emphasis on national pride and racial identity" (p. 12). If the cycle were to continue, compromise will become increasingly difficult. Given the events that occurred after "The Cove" movie's release, polarization of both sides will continue to grow if the trend remains:

> For many of the inhabitants of Taiji, however the price of becoming a national symbol has been high. During my fieldwork in Taiji in 2015, locals remarked that they were tired of constantly being on guard and that shopkeepers were no longer allowed to give interviews to foreigners. One resident feared that one day a fanatic from one of the

> opposing factions might resort to violence and endanger the well-being of his children. During my stay, I was constantly with a Japanese guide, but one evening I walked from the Taiji Whale Museum to my hotel alone, crossing the larger of the two coves featured in the documentary. A "concerned citizen" must have seen me soon after this, the police arrived at my hotel looking for "a suspicious foreigner." This demonstrated how tense the atmosphere in Taiji was (Holm, p. 6).

A first step towards reconciliation may be to lower the international pressure against Japan. To some, this may appear counter-intuitive—as it might be assumed that profit underlies the drive of the pro-whaling lobby. However, it is known that the whaling industry's commercial viability is questionable—as detailed above with the decreasing interest in whale meat and the whaling industry as a whole. It provides marginal profits, along with the aforementioned "whaling towns" struggling to resume commercial whaling without turning to government aid. In sum, financial issues of the industry are irrelevant—to the confusion of most, who question its continuation—but fail to see the whaling issue as a symbolic one. As such, pro-whaling groups have insulated whaling from criticism and silenced critics. One way to ensure that Japan is more responsive to international concerns is to develop a compromise, ideally through allowing its continuation of commercial whaling. This offers a promising path to diplomatic relations—which will allow Japan to participate in the continuing process of whale conservation with other nations in the future.

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"Can Whaling in Japan be Justified by Culture?" divulges on the current, tension-driven debate between pro-whalers and anti-whalers. In the process, the paper uncovers the reasoning behind the hostility towards Japan's whaling practices and, in turn, posits a solution in which Japan should still be able to do so.